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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of the International Youth Leadership Institute (IYLI), summarized in this IUME Brief, helps fill the gaps in knowledge about how youth programs help Blacks and Latinos negotiate their adolescence and attempt to form an integrated sense of self. IYLI, founded in 1989, is an academic leadership development program for Black and Latino high school students (called Fellows) that provides leadership training and exposure to international education and career options through biweekly seminars and overseas study in Africa and Latin America. Since its inception, IYLI has been staffed by a core group of volunteers, all of whom have been of African descent. Selection to the program is based on interest in leadership, community development, and global affairs. Academic standing is not a basis for selection as a Fellow, although applicants must submit a school transcript so that staff members can offer appropriate academic support. Following IYLI's seventh year of operation, 29 Fellows, representative of the total of 109 participants over the years, completed a survey or participated in focus groups about the experiment. Seventy-five percent were girls, while 69% were Black, 10% Latino, and 21% of mixed heritage. Fellows reported that the program met their expectations, and they saw the overseas study as particularly significant. Fellows were split between perceiving Black and Latino youth as having the same or some same and some different identity needs and concerns, but their perceptions of adolescence and identity reflected their cognitive strengths. They tended to draw a connection between their participation in IYLI and identity, and they valued achieving a positive sense of self based on ethnicity. Overall, IYLI was able to meet the developmental needs of its participants because its aims and practices aligned with the reasons why Fellows joined a youth program. The evaluation of IYLI provides insight into adolescent and identity development and highlights the significance of continuity between home and school institutions for Black and Latino youth. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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FINDING COMMUNITY AND FORMING IDENTITY: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF YOUTH PROGRAMS SERVING BLACKS AND LATINOS

Youth programs are social structures that shape "the young person's evolving sense of identity, goals and connections to larger society" (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 56). One way that they promote positive youth development, particularly for Blacks and Latinos, is by creating coherence between family and community (Center for Early Adolescence, 1985; Nelson-Le Gall, 1994). How well programs tend to a youth's needs affects how well they support the youth's healthy development. Yet because the overriding emphasis in adolescent research is on the white, middle-class youth (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996; "Adolescence," 1990; Gibbs, 1989), insight into the development experiences of non-whites is sparse.

An evaluation of the International Youth Leadership Institute (IYLI) helps fills the gap in knowledge about how programs help Blacks and Latinos negotiate their adolescence and attempt to form an integrated sense of self. IYLI, co-sponsored by the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, was founded in 1989 to foster the potential of adolescents of African descent to contribute to their community and the larger society. The intent of this evaluation, which is summarized below, was to ascertain the merits of the program as well as to elicit participants' views and experiences related to adolescent identity development.

THE INTERNATIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE PROGRAM

IYLI is an academic leadership development program for Black and Latino high school students (called Fellows) that provides leadership training and exposure to international education and career options through bi-weekly seminars and overseas study. IYLI operates in the belief that preparation for global leadership requires the following: (1) the acquisition of knowledge about global issues and events; (2) the development of analytical skills for assessing this knowledge; (3) the development of leadership skills; and (4) an opportunity for firsthand, international experiences. Its seminars focus on current global issues and coincide with the academic calendar. The overseas study programs take place in Africa during the summer (the Summer Fellowship Program) and in Latin America during the winter break (the Winter Institute). They include language lessons; research projects; tours to historical and cultural sites; and meetings with local youth and educational, diplomatic, and business leaders.

Fellows develop their leadership skills through contributing their ideas and opinions in group discussions, planning and facilitating seminars, and sharing their knowledge in their community. Fundraising activities conducted on behalf of the Summer Fellowship Program also promote Fellows' leadership development.

Since its inception, IYLI has been staffed by a core group of volunteers who have extensive overseas experience and diverse educational and professional backgrounds in education, the arts, counseling psychology, social work, broadcast journalism, political science, and international affairs. All are of African descent. IYLI also receives support from the Parents' Group, and through its fifth program year, the Mentor Program.

Acceptance into IYLI rests on the ability of applicants to demonstrate interest in leadership and community development and global affairs through completion of an application and an interview with a staff member and current Fellow. Academic standing is not used as a basis for selection, although applicants must submit a school transcript to provide Institute staff members with information about their strengths and challenges so they can offer appropriate academic support.

THE IYLI EVALUATION

Methodology

Following IYLI's seventh year of operation, in surveys, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews, Fellows were asked about their concept of adolescence (defined as age 14 to 19) and identity development, personal perceptions of their experiences in the program, and the program's impact on them. IYLI parents, staff, and mentors also participated in the evaluation through surveys and focus group interviews. Archival materials (e.g., reports, meeting minutes, program materials, Fellows' files, etc.) were examined to identify program goals, collect demographic data, and learn how the program evolved over time.

Demographics

The composition of the 29 Fellows who completed the survey and/or participated in two focus groups was representative of the total group of 109 current and alumni Fellows. Respondents comprised 75 percent girls and 25 percent boys; and 69 percent Blacks, 10 percent Latinos, and 21 percent students of mixed heritage. Fellows attended every conceivable type of high school (e.g., small, specialized, independent, parochial) in every borough of New York City (as well as in Westchester and Suffolk Counties, the Poconos, and New Jersey). Their grades ranged from excellent (90 and above) to failing (65 and below). Most Fellows (70 percent) had family incomes falling between

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$25,000 and $65,000.

The Fellows' Review of IYLI

Nearly all the survey respondents reported that IYLI met their expectations, even while recognizing some constraints (e.g., overextended staff, lack of funding), and would recommend the program because it offers many opportunities few Blacks and Latinos otherwise have access to. While respondents cited all program components as important to their education, they saw overseas study as particularly significant because it promotes cross-cultural exchange which in turn leads Fellows to new understandings about themselves and about others. Both males and females had similar experiences in and perceptions of IYLI.

YOUTH IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

It is necessary to understand how adolescents in general develop before considering the significance of programs like IYLI in the lives of youth. It is also important to learn how Fellows themselves conceptualize adolescence.

Components of Identity

Self-concepts are comprised of several different characteristics. On a continuum, they range from "embedded identities," which are chosen by individuals (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996), to "ascribed characteristics," which are immutable. Thus, individuals have a complement of identities including, at one end, descriptions such as athlete or artist; and at the other, race and ethnicity.

For adolescents overall, embedded identities, which allow them to distinguish themselves socially from others, are crucial to their sense of self, for this is the time when they are first attempting self-definition through personal exploration (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990), and integration of their sense of self in a social context (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Cotê, 1996; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). For Blacks, ascribed characteristics (i.e., ethnicity/race, gender) may have special importance (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). For Black and Latino youth in particular, development of an identity is complicated by the need to grow in a context which may negatively impact their self-perceptions (Inclan & Herron, 1989; Ogbu, 1983). Identity development for African American females may be further challenged insofar as they experience triple oppression, a consequence of their ethnicity, gender, and, frequently, class status (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996).

Adolescence

Fellows' descriptions of adolescence and their own particular experiences support the commonly-held perception that teenagers straddle the fence between two worlds (Steinberg, 1990; "Adolescence," 1990). They indicated tension between wanting both independence and the support of adults, and wanting to have fun and having to consider more weighty concerns. As one Fellow said, an adolescent is an "under-experienced youth developing into an adult."

Most Fellows conceptualized the period as a time of transition, growth (physical and mental), and self-discovery, wherein youth are "forming new ideas and goals about life" and "exploring who they are and what they want to be." One Fellow viewed adolescence as an opportunity "to try on new personalities before choosing the one you want when you're an adult." Echoing the literature, most also acknowledged that adolescence is a time to engage in essential academic and social experiences that promote their learning and growth (Center for Early Adolescence, 1985).

The Fellows' notions of "typical" adolescents underlined the complexity of the period, as they said they were "trying to get their lives together," "defining their role in society," and also thinking about the future in the midst of learning, exploring, and being involved with academic and social pursuits. They were "sometimes frustrated and insecure," "hypersensitive to peer pressure," and grappling with the "lines of authority which are being blurred." Nevertheless, Fellows generally portrayed themselves as not being overly burdened by concerns about the future. Family and friends played a role in stabilizing the experiences of some Fellows. One Fellow stated that his adolescence "was extremely calm and comfortable thanks to [his] family."

Adolescent Identity Development

Overall. In general, Fellows defined identity as a product of: 1) ethnicity, gender, and class; 2) life experiences; 3) personality, individual style, and beliefs; and 4) self-perception. In particular, they asserted, identity:

> *...is understanding the history and culture of the people who gave birth to me and having an allegiance with one's group in society.*
>
> *...requires many experiences and much thought to decide, to really know who you are.*
>
> *...is what sets you apart from others, your originality.*
>
> *...is knowing who you are and what you're about. Knowing yourself. Having an image that you like and is not easily changed.*

Most Fellows identified themselves as having characteristics inclusive of both embedded and ascribed traits, citing class and nationality as falling in between, given that they change over the course of a life, though not as freely as an individual's interests and personal style. Other Fellows mentioned personal qualities (e.g., interests; competence; beliefs; even the way they "dress, act, and love") as defining their identity. As one Fellow said, identity is "always changing, it's solid but fluid."

Discussing the relationship between their life experiences and their emerging identity, Fellows conveyed a sense of self-pride whether or not they had affirming or challenging experiences. Many believed they had few experiences which shaped their identity, but that their identity influenced the experiences they had, how they perceived them, and how they reflected on the experiences of others. For example:

> *My identity made me care about my culture and community as well as take action to help.*
>
> *Learning Spanish helped me to understand other cultures and why people are the way they are.*
>
> *I know how to handle myself when I'm the only Black [in a situation] because of my school experiences.*
>
> *I was constantly told I could achieve anything and was supported in my endeavors.*

Meaningfulness of Ethnicity. Fellows were split between perceiving Black and Latino youth as having the same or some same and some different identity needs and concerns. Most Fellows perceiving the former reasoned that the two groups have a shared history that impacts their present social status and the conditions under which they live:

> *African American and Latino youth have the same fears, needs, etc., especially if they live in the same communi-*

ty because we are all categorized as minorities and have to prove the statistics wrong.

They both deal with the same ingrown, stagnant prejudices of America's white citizens.

Both are growing up in a society in which white people are glamorized and Blacks and Latinos are put down.

Others viewed the similarities more globally:

We all come from the same place, God's heart. Our cultures are different but not our souls.

They both have the same goals and concerns because I think all anyone wants is to know where they're from and where they're going.

Fellows perceiving Blacks and Latinos as having both similarities and differences recognized the impact of history, culture, and heritage on an individual's lived experiences. While one respondent cited the common problem of racism and economic oppression, he also noted differences in language, homeland, and immigration experiences. Another believed the differences are emphasized more than the similarities, while he nevertheless acknowledged Latinos also differ from each other despite having a Spanish legacy in common.

Two Fellows who stated that Blacks and Latinos have dissimilar needs and concerns did so because the groups are of "different races," and "every individual has his own needs and concerns."

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND IYLI

The Role of IYLI in Identity Development

Not surprisingly, Fellows' own adolescence shared characteristics with "typical" adolescent experiences. Fellows demonstrated their cognitive strengths when reflecting on their perceptions of adolescence and identity. They also indicated acquiring greater competence and confidence to act on their beliefs. They may have some doubts about attaining their goals, but nonetheless have aspirations which they are actively working on realizing. Enrolling in the Institute certainly suggests Fellows' motivation to gain new experiences, skills, and knowledge. In fact, many asserted that joining IYLI was a function of their sense of self. Hence Fellows' comments echoed the old riddle: Which comes first—do Fellows choose IYLI because of its compatibility with their self-concept, or is IYLI shaping Fellows' identity?

The integration of self, as aptly noted by one Fellow, "does not occur in a vacuum." It has, in fact, been called both a dependent and independent variable (Weigert, Teitge, & Teitge, 1986). The role of IYLI in helping Fellows form commitments about who they are, then, can be crucial. Fellows, therefore, described programs like IYLI as serving multiple functions: 1) the provision of support and guidance; 2) the opportunity to develop skills and self-confidence; 3) the opportunity for exploration of self, new ideas and opinions, and future possibilities; and 4) the provision of a safe space. Stated in their words:

IYLI offered me mentoring and mature friendships I didn't have access to before...it offered me a forum where academic and political interests and curiosity were not seen as a reason for ostracism.

IYLI helped me to use my thinking skills when trying to solve problems or come up with ideas for activities (with the group). In my everyday life when problems occur, I know how to handle the situation from the experience of being in a group.

Throughout my life I have been involved in many programs and organizations headed by caring adults. They have taken me under their wing, given me guidance, and supported me. I would say they have given me as much, and in some cases more, than my official teachers.

IYLI helped me to strive for higher goals. It gives me an outlet for my feelings and a place to get support.

The Role of Identity in IYLI Enrollment

The fact that IYLI is geared for African American and Latino youth apparently made it desirable for most Fellows who drew a connection between their participation in IYLI and identity, mainly because "in a race dominated world, race, unity, pride, and esteem are very important," and they "...could more easily relate to others in the group who may be experiencing the same things." Fellows who stated they joined IYLI because they liked "being around people who were like [themselves]" might mean peers with the same interests, concerns and/or ethnicity. Yet, joining a program like IYLI is perhaps especially meaningful for those attending predominately white schools:

Being in an all white, private school, I was trying to find a sense of identity. In IYLI I got a sense of myself and could bring it back to school. I became president of a club and used the information I got from seminars for the club.

The following perspective reaffirms how an adolescent might consider his/her options for joining a program like IYLI based on his or her knowledge of self:

Students who have no confidence or other negative identity traits would be less willing to join groups. Someone who is uncomfortable speaking would not join a debate team. Someone who feels stupid would not join student government or a leadership group.

While Fellows acknowledged that Blacks and Latinos may have different histories and cultures, they agreed that the perception of both groups by mainstream America affects their social status similarly—and negatively. Thus, achieving a positive sense of self based on their ethnicity is equally important to Fellows as is being valued for their personality, competence, beliefs, and interests. As one parent stated, "Being with people of their same culture who have knowledge of that culture has been helpful," while another expressed "...concern about putting [his] Latino son in a program that would be detrimental to his well-being." The significance of participating in a youth program which reinforces or helps Fellows define their self-concept seems critical, suggesting it would be negligent for any program serving Black and Latino youth to ignore the significance of ethnicity.

Specifically, the experiences that Fellows have which affect their identity development occur in a social context that is significantly impacted by their race/ ethnicity (defined here as the social and cultural heritage of a group of people), and also, obviously, by their age. As adolescents, they are in the unfortunate position where "their presence is a problem, or regarded as a problem" (Hebdige, 1988, p. 17). Giroux (1992) and Ogbu (1983) additionally contend that as people of color, Fellows likely see themselves in conflict with mainstream norms, which are dictated by whites. A large part of Fellows' development is, therefore, a struggle to derive meaning and value from the plethora of "cross-cultural" messages they receive. Knowledge and appreciation of their eth-

nicity need not supercede other defined identities, but for nearly all Fellows the significance of ethnicity was clear. It is a significant building block in their attainment of an integrated sense of self that "...helps [Fellows] 'achieve balance'—sure footing and a sense of purpose—in their communities as well as an ability to negotiate different roles in different places" (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 38). Further, according to at least one Fellow, IYLI, especially its overseas study program, evoked the traditional rites of passage ritual that both helped her understand her "Africanism" and that publicly marked her transition from childhood to adulthood.

The Role of IYLI and Leadership Development

Despite the program's attention to ethnicity issues, IYLI's primary aim is to prepare Fellows for global leadership. Its challenge in increasing Fellows' leadership capacity rests on how well it helps Fellows become informed, open-minded social critics without imposing particular viewpoints. While it should be recognized that education is a political act (Shor, 1992), fostering constructive, critical thinkers through a doctrinaire approach wholly misses the point. Thus, IYLI seeks only to provide an environment to support Fellows' intellectual development, furnishing the tools to foster open-minded thinking: exposure to diverse perspectives, people, and experiences, and building on the qualities and values Fellows brought to the program. Still, the Fellows were clear about the program's orientation; as one said, "In terms of identity we're supposed to be political...to identify with becoming leaders. The seminars were very political."

Admittedly, IYLI attracts students and their families who are concerned that the program's ideology is consistent with identity development needs and home values. But there was a median at which Fellows' values and ideas coalesced with IYLI objectives, even while it encouraged freedom of expression and exploration. One Fellow remarked, "In other organizations, to be a Black man you have to wear a dashiki. IYLI is not like that. It's open." IYLI thus may have found a balance between imparting particular perspectives and providing Fellows with opportunity to explore their own.

CONCLUSION

Adolescence is a time when individuals form commitments about self, perhaps while grappling with discordant messages that fail to edify their culture. The extent to which youth have opportunities to explore their ideas and perceptions, values and beliefs, and place in the world, impacts their sense of self and overall well-being. Exposure to multiple and nurturing environments therefore benefits all youth.

The International Youth Leadership Institute is one such socializing agent for youth of African descent. It provides Fellows with: 1) an environment that encourages and guides personal exploration, 2) multiple and diverse learning experiences, 3) a variety of youth and adults with which to interact, and 4) experiences and information to affirm their identity. IYLI fosters opportunities for Fellows to continually assess, test, and reflect on their values, opinions, and aspirations through contact with socially and intellectually like-minded peers. It also offers Fellows the opportunity to interact with a staff that shares with them a common social and cultural/historical background, as well as one that represents professional and educational diversity.

Overall, IYLI was able to meet Fellows' developmental needs because its aims and practices aligned with the reasons why Fellows joined a youth program. The evaluation of IYLI demonstrated how the perceptions of non-white youth can provide new insights into adolescent and identity development, as it highlighted the significance of continuity between home and social institutions for Black and Latino youth.

—Susan Wilcox

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